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Costa Rica rancher laughs off rumors

By Glenn Garvin
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P CIUDAD QUESADA, Costa Rica — John Hull, a semi-retired cattle rancher whose 1,800-acre farm sits near the Nicaraguan border, acknowledges that he has met most of the important Nicaraguan rebel leaders and that he routinely helps them evacuate their wounded.

But he denies unequivocally that he is a narcotics trafficker, a gun runner, a CIA plotter or an organizer of assassinations.

"My record, for the 18 years that I've been here, is helping people," he insists. "For years this area was not accessible by road. So I've always used my airstrips to fly wounded people out of the jungle, whether they were cut by machetes or what-ever."

"So it was only natural that when wounded people began coming in here from the war in Nicaragua, the Costa Ricans would bring them to me. There's never been any secret that I was flying wounded out of here. But I never asked any of them a question, I never asked if they were Contras or Sandinistas, Nicaraguans or Costa Ricans. This has been strictly a humanitarian thing, not political."

Apart from the U.S. ambassador, Mr. Hull has become the most famous American in Costa Rica. For several years now, the local press has identified him as a CIA liaison to the Nicaraguan rebels.

Two American journalists based here recently named him in a \$23.8 million lawsuit filed in federal court in Miami, charging him with a long list of crimes, including drug trafficking, kidnapping and murder.

Mr. Hull says he is an anti-communist who is "under full-scale attack by the left here that would like to get me out of here."

He says he is a target partly because he is a successful businessman who provides several hundred Costa Ricans with jobs, "and the communists always try to destroy an economy in order to take it over."

Did he help plant a bomb that killed three reporters? "Nope, nope. Didn't do that." Did he plot to blow

up the U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica and murder the ambassador? "False, that's false."

Does he help Nicaraguan rebels smuggle drugs into the United States? "No, there's never been any drug smuggling or anything like that." Did he kidnap, torture, and

eventually murder a deserter from the Nicaraguan rebels? "Nah, that's totally a made-up story."

Does John Hull work for the CIA? This draws a laugh.

"That could hardly be more ridiculous," he says. "I'm sure the CIA is not employing broken-down 65-year-old field agents. If they wanted to offer me the job, I'd be tickled pink to accept it but they haven't."

But Eden Pastora, the Nicaraguan rebel leader who abandoned the war three weeks ago, told The Washington Times that CIA officials had assured him Mr. Hull was their employee.

"And it is well known that the airstrips on Mr. Hull's farm are used to smuggle drugs and people who lack proper documents into the

United States," Mr. Pastora said.

"I don't know why he said that," retorts Mr. Hull. "Why does Pastora say a lot of things? Why did he lose a war?"

The Indiana-born rancher, now a naturalized Costa Rican citizen, served in the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II. He enlisted in Canada in order to fight Nazis before the United States joined the war.

As he spoke, a half-dozen reporters milled around him in the Spanish-style courtyard of his sprawling ranch house about 30 miles from the Nicaraguan border.

Mr. Hull had invited the reporters out to his ranch for a barbecue with many of his neighboring farmers and businessmen from nearby towns. "I just wanted to clear the air about some of this stuff," he explains. "And I wanted the reporters to meet some of the local people."

"If I was running dope and killing people all the time out here, I don't think I'd be able to get any of the locals to speak up for me."

"This is an intensely political place," says Jim Livergood, a transplanted Illinois farmer who

grows cocoa and oranges on 1,500 acres located near Mr. Hull's ranch. He says most of the local farmers are strongly anti-Sandinista, and some of them have embraced the Contra's cause with a vigor he finds

a little frightening.

"Anybody here in this border area is indirectly involved with the Contras," says Vladimir Arroyo, president of the Chamber of Commerce in nearby San Carlos. "We're defending our country from the Sandinistas. So we might give the Contras food or medicine, but not arms."

"John might be more involved, because he has more facilities, like his airstrip and his land so close to the border, that are of use to them. But if he were a Costa Rican instead of an American, nobody would notice."

Mr. Hull says he thinks the Sandinistas have a personal grudge against him because he refused to help them in their successful war to overthrow the government of Anastasio Somoza.

"This all started in 1979," he says. "The Sandinistas came and wanted to use our lands and our airstrips [he has five] to pursue their strike against Somoza. I refused. It was pretty obvious to me in talking to them that there was a hardcore communist group at their center."

"But I did make the same offer to them that I've made to the Contras — that if they could get their wounded out of Nicaragua, they could use our airstrip to evacuate them to hospitals. That wasn't good enough, and they began burning houses here, cutting fences, killing cattle, and generally doing everything they could to make life miserable around here."

Mr. Hull says the Sandinistas really declared war on him in 1984, after he took two Nicaraguan refugees to Washington to testify about Sandinista atrocities.

"Ever since then the communists have really leaned on me," he says. "They have sent two hit teams in here to kill me, and when that didn't work, they tried disinformation."